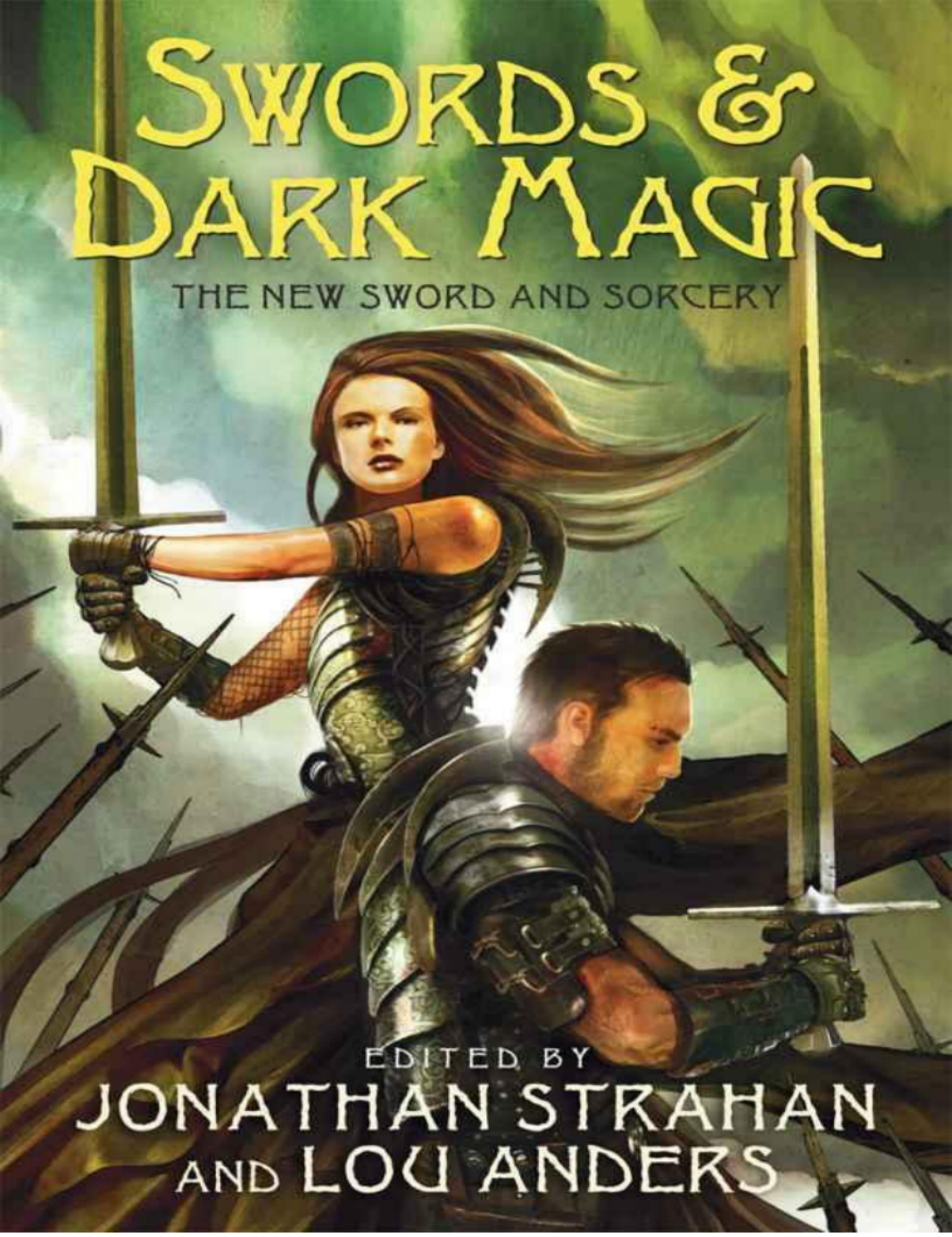
SWORDS &
DARK MAGIC
THE NEW SWORD AND SORCERY
EDITED BY
JONATHAN STRAHAN
AND LOU ANDERS

Annotation

MICHAEL MOORCOCK was born in London, England. At the age of sixteen, he became editor of *Tarzan Adventures,* and later, *Sexton Black Library*. But it was his editorship of *New Worlds* magazine, from May 1964 to March 1971, during which he fostered the “New Wave,” perhaps the most important movement in the history of science fiction. Moorcock is best known, however, for his creation of the Multiverse and his influence on sword and sorcery (a subgenre he helped name, together with Fritz Leiber). His character, Elric of Melniboné, is one of the most influential fantasy antiheroes the genre has ever produced. Not only have the novels been in continuous print since the 1970s, but Elric has crossed over into comics, role-playing games, and rock and roll. Moorcock’s influence on sword and sorcery fiction is colossal and no anthology of same could hope to be complete without him. He and his wife, Linda, currently divide their time between Texas, France, and California.

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RED PEARLS
An Elric Story
Michael Moorcock

For George Mann and G. H. Teed

Over the Edge

The sun, rimmed in copper now and bloated as if with blood, settled upon the horizon, casting long black shadows across the strangely made ship, the *Silela Li*. On deck, two priestesses of Xiombarg, in their elaborate quilted habits and glinting bronze crowns, stood at the ship's rail, considering the view and listening to the distant hungry roar which greeted the coming of darkness with godlike glee. The women began to chant, performing their evening prayers, and it seemed to them that a great shadow in the form of a woman, the shape preferred by their deity, appeared in the sky overhead. As they completed their ritual, two men came up from the passenger quarters below. One was short, with a shock of startling red hair, a ruddy complexion, large blue eyes, and a wide, smiling mouth. He wore a thick padded jacket and deerskin britches tucked into soft boots. His tall companion was clad in black, silk and leather, hair the colour of milk, skin pale as the thinnest bleached linen. His long head with its tapering ears and slightly slanting brows was as remarkable as his sharp, glittering ruby-coloured eyes. Like his companion, he was unarmed. The women, lowering their hands, completed their ceremonies and turned, surprised to see the men, who bowed politely. The priestesses acknowledged the two and passed down the companionway, returning to their cabin below decks. The men replaced the women at the rail of the *Silela Li*. The disc of the sun was halfway below the water now, its light cutting a red road across the sea.

The tall man was well known in the North and West. He was Elric, sometimes called Kinslayer, former emperor of Melniboné, until lately the dominant power in the world; the short man was Moonglum of Elwher in the so-called unmapp'd East. They had been travelling companions for some time and had shared several adventures. Most recently, they had come from Nassea-Tikri, where they had found two more people who had complicated reasons for joining them but this evening had elected to stay below.

Moonglum grinned after the disappearing priestesses. "Xiombarg's worshippers seem a little more comely in this part of the world. I'm beginning to regret that decision I made in the tavern."

A faint smile from his friend. "I'm too closely bound to Xiombarg's fellow Chaos Lord to wish any further entanglement with the Dukes and Duchesses of Entropy. And, if my knowledge of their beliefs is correct, I think you'll find those two aren't interested in sharing themselves with anyone but their patron and each other."

"Ah." Moonglum regarded the empty companionway with

disappointment. “Elric, my friend, sometimes I wish you would not share your knowledge so freely with me.”

“I assure you, I’m sharing very little.” The albino dropped his gaze to inspect the lapping waters below.

Now the sun was almost gone, but the distant roar was somewhat louder, as if in triumph. And then the sun went down, leaving the ship in a grey-gold twilight. A strong wind blew suddenly, filling the ship’s enormous blue sails, and the oarsmen below rested their long oars. Unusually, they took the oars fully into the body of the ship. The two men heard the sound of wood banging against wood, of metal being drawn against metal as the rowlocks were firmly shut.

At this, both men reluctantly left the deck and descended the companionway to where their cabins were located. In the gangway they met the captain’s first officer, Ghatan, who saluted politely. “Make sure all’s watertight within your cabins, masters. We’ll be going over a couple of hours after moonrise. A bell will be sounded in the morning, when it’s safe to unbatten.”

“If we still live,” Moonglum muttered cheerfully.

The mate grinned back at him. “Indeed! Good night, masters. With luck you’ll wake in the World Above.”

Wishing them both good night, Elric entered his quarters. From overhead came a series of heavy thumps and the sound of rattling chains as the ship was tightened against the water.

His cabin was filled with a deep orange light emanating from a lantern hanging from the centre of the low ceiling. It showed a seated woman frowning over a small scroll. She looked up and smiled as the albino entered. Extremely beautiful, she was the black-haired Princess Nauhaduar of Uyt, who, these days, called herself simply Nauha. Her large, dark eyes reflected the light. Her lips were slightly parted in an intelligent smile. “So we have passed the point of no return, my lord.”

“It seems so.” Elric began to strip off his shirt, moving towards their wide bunk piled with quilts and furs. “Perhaps we’d do well to sleep now, before the real noise begins. Too late for you to consider returning to Uyt.”

She shrugged, replacing the scroll in its tubular case. “Never would I wish to miss this experience, my lord. After all, until you convinced me otherwise I shared the common view of our world as dish-shaped. I believed all other descriptions to be mere fool’s tales.”

“Aye. It’s as well so few believe the truth, for the reality would surely confuse them.” He spoke a little abstractedly, his mind on other matters.

“I am,” she said, “still confused.”

“The actuality will be demonstrated anon.” He was naked now, slim and muscular in all his strange, pale beauty. He picked up a

pitcher and poured water into a bowl, washing languidly.

She, too, began to prepare for bed. Since she had thrown in her fate with Elric's, the ennui to which she had become reconciled had disappeared. She felt it could never return now. Elric's dreams rarely gave him a full night's sleep, but even if the albino were to abandon her, she would never regret knowing him or, as she suspected, loving him. Kinslayer and traitor he might be, it had never mattered to her what he was or what she risked. Dark and light were inextricably combined in this strange half-human creature whose ancestors had ruled the world before her own race emerged from the mud of creation, whose terrible sword, now rolled in rough cloth and skin and stowed in the lower locker, seemed possessed of its own dark intelligence. She knew she should be afraid of it, as of him, and part of her reexperienced the horror she had already witnessed once, there in the forests of mysterious Soom, but the rest of her was drawn by curiosity to know more about the sword's properties and the moody prince who carried it. He had warned her what kind of creature he was, yet she had insisted she come with him, leaving her own father and twin sister in Nassea-Tikri to accompany him, even though she abandoned all that was familiar and dear to her. Lying beside that hard, wonderful pale and vibrant body which already slept, she listened intently to the sounds of the ship and the sea. Timbers creaked and the thunder from the horizon grew louder. She sensed the galleon's speed increasing, evidently borne on a rapid current. She had some notion of what to expect but longed to wake and question the albino. He continued to sleep, murmuring a little yet apparently at peace, and she could not rouse him. But was his apparent lack of concern feigned?

Faintly, from above, a deep-voiced bell sounded. The albino shivered, as if in response, still unwaking. The ship reared, rolling her against his body, reared once more, sending a vibrant shock through her. The *Silela Li* rocked, shuddered, her timbers moaning and straining as her hull dipped one way and then another, rolling from side to side so wildly that Nauha was forced to wrap her arms around her lover to steady herself. Elric moved as if to resist her, then woke for a moment. "Are we over?"

"Not yet."

He closed his crimson eyes again. For a while they slept. Perhaps for hours, she could not tell.

Nauha awoke to a sense of the ship's speed increasing. "Elric?"

She gasped as they were tossed cruelly about as if in a vast maelstrom. "Elric!"

Still he made no response. She wondered if he had died or lay in an enchantment, while, from the locker below, came a deep complaint

from her lover's sentient blade. The noise of the water grew into a deafening roar, drowning the grumblings of the black sword as the ship was borne at a steeper and steeper angle of descent:

Towards the edge of the world.

Strangers at Sea

Earlier, when Elric had told her where he was going and assured her he would leave her at the port from which she could return home, Nauha had asked him levelly if he were tired of her. “No,” he had said. “But I would not wish to put you at peril.”

She had no intention of parting from him. She had always wondered at the rumours concerning the doomed prince of ruins. Now she had the chance to discover at least a little of the truth. Moved as much by curiosity as by attraction to him, she gave herself up to the adventure as readily as she had given herself up to his urgent, alien body. Now she was ready to risk her life and her sanity, as she had been warned she must, to discover whatever lay beyond the edge of the world. The albino sorcerer had told her of the dangers, from which few voyagers ever returned. He had spoken quietly of all they might face. And then she had replied to him.

“While I care for life, my lord, I care not for life without risk or excitement.” She had laughed at his serious expression. Did she regret her decision now?

Still the ship gathered speed, trembling urgently from side to side. Every timber protesting, it dipped at an even steeper angle, rocking horribly, threatening to throw Nauha from the bunk. Again she clung to the albino. He murmured, “Cymoril,” and held her in those white arms with gentle strength. How could one so apparently sickly own such power? She moved against him. This was not the first time he had cried out the name of his betrothed, slain, albeit accidentally, by his own hand. In his sleep, he steadied her.

The ship bucked again. Now, suddenly, there was the sensation of falling, falling as the ship plunged over the edge, falling forever, it seemed, until with a massive crash, which made her feel every bone in her was smashed, the *Silela Li* struck an unyielding mass.

Nauha bit her lip. They had hit a reef. There could be no other explanation. The ship was breaking apart. The *Silela Li* moved rhythmically up and down as if in the grip of a monster. Nauha could no longer silence the long, full-throated scream which burst from her body. Certain that they were destroyed and were rapidly sinking, she reconciled herself for death, but Elric’s arms tightened a little more and, when she opened her eyes, she could see through the gloom that he was amused. Was this how he accepted their fate? Why was she reassured?

Then the water became strangely quiet. Were they sinking? The ship gentled into an easy forward motion. Elric closed his eyes. A faint smile touched his lips, as if he’d read her thoughts. Overhead she

heard men's urgent voices, full of relief, calling orders and responses. Suddenly Elric swung out of the bunk and began to unscrew the covers over the cabin's only porthole, letting in silver light which made his body almost invisible to her. Cool, sweet air crept through the ship. Did she hear a seabird?

"Where are we?" Then she secretly cursed herself for her inanity. He did not answer but moved away from the porthole, becoming a shadow. Eventually he spoke. His voice was soft, his tone almost formally polite.

"We're where you did not expect to be. On the underside of the world. Which the people who dwell here call the World Above. I'm not greatly experienced in this, but I think we had an easy transition. There are still several hours to dawn. Best sleep some more." He touched her face, perhaps making a small spell, and she obeyed.

Later, dozing, she heard a tap at the cabin door and Moonglum called from the other side. Elric rose to answer, letting her cover herself before opening the door to the redheaded Elwherite, who stood there grinning, his arm around Cita Tine. She was pretty, with steady, daring eyes and a firm mouth. Moonglum had met her in the Steel Womb the night before they embarked. Cita Tine was short and sturdy, with a dancer's figure and muscles. She had black hair and eyes, a dark skin typical of her people. She seemed most relieved of all. No doubt she too had expected to die as the ship fell. Now she breathed in the sweet, cool air blowing through the ship and she cocked her head merrily, hearing the oars being unshipped and thrust into choppy water. There came a snap as the wind took a sail. From somewhere came the smell of frying meat. Overhead a dozen voices called at once. Everyone aboard had an air of astonishment, of disbelief that they survived. Even Nauha's moody lover was apparently more light-headed than usual as he made his excuses and called for warm water.

When they had bathed and dressed, Elric and Nauha joined the others in the big public gallery where passengers and ship's officers took their meals. Besides the two priestesses and Elric's party, there were six more passengers of the merchant class, more than a little shaken by their recent experience, exchanging excited descriptions of their night. Only one other was not evidently a merchant, for he sat a little apart from the rest, wrapped up in a dark red sea-cloak, as if against a cold only he experienced. Saturnine, incommunicative, he showed only a passing interest in his fellow passengers. Like most of the others, he was bound for fabled Hizss. The previous night, he had eaten quickly and retired. Moonglum had glanced at him once or twice, but Elric's interest in mortals and their affairs was casual at best. He ignored the passenger as thoroughly as he did the rest, giving

his attention only to Moonglum, who had a trick of amusing him, and to Princess Nauha, for whom he had an unusual regard.

"And so here we are!" Moonglum munched on his bread, looking out of the nearest porthole at the calm sea. "I owe you an apology, Prince Elric, for I did not wholly believe your assertions of another world beneath our own. But now it is demonstrated! Our plane is not flat but egg-shaped. And here we are alive to prove it! While I do not understand by what supernatural agency the ocean remains upon the surface of the egg, I have to accept that it does…"

A deep-throated laugh from one of the merchants. "And do your folk believe, as some of mine do, that there are other eggs, scattered across the ether, of all sizes, some of which resemble our own, Master Melnibonéan? With people dwelling on them, of commensurate dimensions, perhaps existing within other eggs, those eggs contained within still more eggs and so on?"

"Or perhaps," smiled another, "you do not believe any of our worlds to be egg-shaped, and think they are instead round, like the nuts of the omerhav tree?"

Elric shrugged, sipping his own yellow breakfast wine and refusing to be drawn into their conversation. As usual, Moonglum was more gregarious and curious. "So some philosophers are convinced, I understand, amongst the intellectuals of my own country. Yet none has yet explained how the waters remain spread upon the surface of these worlds, nor indeed how ships sail on them or how we are able to stand upon the decks and not float like pollen into the air."

The saturnine man raised his head, suddenly alert, but when neither Moonglum nor Elric elaborated, returned his attention to his food.

Cita Tine, the tavern girl, giggled. "My people have known of the sea passage between the two worlds for centuries. Our young men come to seek their fortunes here. We grew wealthy as a result of that knowledge and learned to build ships like this one, able to withstand the massive pressures on their hulls, and so we came to negotiate the passage."

The captain, seated at the far end of the table, put a cautionary finger to his lips. "Best say no more, girl, or our secrets become common property. We're rich only while most folk believe this side of the world to be legend."

"But my companion here has been this way before," declared Moonglum. "Which is why I was ready to take the risk of it. And swear that oath of silence, of course, before we set sail."

"I was not aware, sir…" The captain raised an enquiring eyebrow at Elric. But the albino did not respond, merely dropping his gaze to look at his own pale hand gripping his wine cup. "What proposed your

first visit, sir, if I might ask?" The captain made cheerful, casual conversation. "Trade? Curiosity?"

For the sake of his companions, Elric made some effort. "I have relatives here."

He had, he thought, been unusually loquacious and egalitarian. The captain did not pursue his theme.

Later, as they took the fine air on deck, staring out over what seemed an infinity of rolling blue white-tipped water, Princess Nauha said to him: "I shall be curious to meet these relations. I had no idea Melnibonéans lived elsewhere than the Dragon Isle."

"They are relatives," he told her, "but they are not of Melniboné and never were. Nor wished to be."

The ship sailed smoothly on, through unchanging weather, across that undisturbed ocean, beneath strange stars, and Elric, in the days that followed, grew increasingly taciturn. Even his friends, save Nauha, took to avoiding him.

On the fifth day of wide water, the focs'l lookout vigorously cried, "Land! Land ho!" bringing all the passengers but the saturnine merchant up on deck to follow the pointing hand to where a long shoreline was visible through light mist, soon more clearly revealing a series of deep, sandy beaches on which white waves broke. Behind the beaches rose dark green foliage, a dense forest, but no sign of settlements of any kind.

Moonglum speculated that possibly these woods were an extension of that jungle which they had lately left, wrapping itself across the world, but this was ignored, so he fell silent as the ship changed course to follow the new coast as she had followed the other.

"Shug Banatt," replied one of the merchants when Moonglum asked what their first port of call would be. "A grim city where the captain has business. We should be there within a day. If of course the pirate slavers spare us."

Moonglum had heard no previous talk of pirates or slavers. "Eh?"

The merchant was pleased with his affect. "They watch for ships coming in from the edge and prey on them. Some vessels are here by accident and make perfect victims. Because we anticipate attack, they are therefore unlikely to attack us."

"Why do the folk of your home port say nothing of this?"

The merchant shrugged and grinned. "We can't drive off trade, Sir Moonglum, can we? The captain's share comes from the fees we charge passengers like yourself. But fear not. We watch for them and are prepared. We carry comparatively little cargo, mostly goods the slavers have no use for, while our money's only of use to merchants like ourselves. They place no value on minted silver. Some say they find it unlucky."

For the rest of the day, the ship held a steady course, following the coast. There was little wind but the water was calm, giving good purchase to their oars, allowing the rowers, all freemen, to keep steady time. Moonglum and his lady friend went below, as usual, while Elric and the princess remained on deck. She was grateful for the sweetness of the air, asking if he smelled the forest.

Elric smiled at this. “I have my own theory. This second world has fewer inhabitants. Therefore they expel less foul air…” He was not entirely serious. She left his side and went to stand on the foredeck, raising her head against the breeze, letting it lift her dark hair and sending it streaming behind her.

The albino stared landward, his thoughts in his past when, on a dreamquest, he had first found this world and a city and a people which welcomed him. Would he be welcomed again? he wondered. He could not recall whether he had originally come to this world in his past or his future. He stared at his bone-white hand. But his skin offered no clue to his age, then or now. He sighed, glad to be alone.

A great yell from above. Still on the foredeck, Princess Nauha echoed the lookout’s voice from the crow’s nest. Swiftly, over the horizon came a great, grey square sail. Two more. A fourth. But Elric’s interest was claimed by a lower, darker hull in the water, the other ships following it in rough formation. The hull had no sails, no oars, yet it slipped through the waves like a killer whale, a triangular shape rising from its slender deck like a dorsal fin. The long, sharp prow, crimson as blood, split the light waves, and several men stood leaning forward as it sped towards them. Never had Elric seen a ship move so quickly, darting like a fish.

“What kind of ship is that, captain? She moves like a living thing.”

The captain kept his eyes on the ships, answering from the corner of his mouth, his body tense as he readied himself to give orders. “First they had the dragons, two centuries or more ago, who raided with them and made them invulnerable. Then the dragons slowly disappeared and these strange, supernatural vessels replaced them. Now there is only one left, but so great is their power and so impregnable their White Fort, deep in that forest, that we cannot ever hope to resist them. We can only negotiate and pray they find it wasteful of their lives to fight us.”

Archers were already running to their positions around Elric. Others pulled canvas from the oiled wood of catapults. The stink of Chaos Fire filled his nostrils as braziers were lit. Black smoke gusted. From below, Moonglum, his twin swords sheathed on his hips, came running up the companionway. He carried something large and thoroughly wrapped in his hands and threw it towards Elric, glad to

be rid of it. Elric caught it easily, stripping away the cloth and leather wrapping to reveal a heavy scabbard, a hilt with a pulsing dark jewel embedded in it. He attached the long sword to his belt. The sword moaned for a moment, perhaps anticipating a bloodletting, and then was silent.

"Pirates with a supernatural ship?" Moonglum murmured. "Will they attack, my lord?"

"Perhaps." Elric glanced to where the princess, tying back her hair, approached. "My lady. You had best arm yourself." She had her own blades below.

"They'll fight?" she asked, turning to follow his suggestion.

"Best be ready for the worst." He indicated the crew. "Just as they are."

She went below and reappeared with slender sword and poignard.

A kind of gasp from the strange leading ship.

Followed by a loud hissing.

A cloud rose from around the central greyish dorsal. Clad in armour the colour of amber, pirate warriors crowded forward. Their long features, slightly slanted eyes peered out of their helmets. Moonglum gave a grunt of surprise.

"Melnibonéans!"

Elric said nothing but his left hand tightened on Stormbringer's hilt.

The ship, still moving towards them without evident propulsion, was clearly visible to them now. With its high triple prow, its long, sleek decks and elaborately carved rails, it had only seemed smaller than the surrounding ships because it sat so low in the water. One tall man stood on the massive upper deck, his armour more intricate than the rest. His features declared his race, but the ship and armour, even the look of his weapons, had little in common with familiar Melnibonéan artefacts.

Slowly, the red hull hove to. The tall captain called out from his poop-deck. "Who are you and where are you bound?" Another great hissing sigh came from the oddly shaped dorsal, ribbed and faintly rosy with reflected light, in the middle-deck. "Quickly now!"

"We're the *Silela Li* bound for Hizss, Selwing Aftra, and ports beyond," replied the captain. "Carrying trade goods and passengers from the World Below."

But the strange ship's captain barely acknowledged him, staring straight at Elric and frowning. Elric stared back with equal hauteur.

Then, to Moonglum's astonishment, the pirate captain spoke in High Melnibonéan, addressing the albino. Moonglum understood enough to recognise a different accent.

"You have come from Below? Where do you journey?"

Elric did not reply directly. “You must answer me first. Do you mean this ship harm?”

The amber-armoured captain shook his head slowly. “Not if you mean to sail on.” But he remained curious. He switched to Common Tongue, addressing the captain of the *Silela Li*. “We’re no threat to you or your ship. You’re bound for Apho and Selwing Aftra?”

“We are, my lord. And Shugg Banat before that. Then Hizss, where we shall take on provisions, make repairs, and give our men some rest before going on to the Snow Islands and sampling the warm water via the Silver Coast, then home again, with our gods’ will.”

“And stop at no other ports between Shugg Banat and Hizss?”

“We do not.”

“Then go in peace.” The pirate frowned, placing slender hands on his railing. He seemed strangely unsettled about his decision.

Moonglum was staring at the tall, pale triangle in the centre of the ship. Under his breath, he said: “I’ll swear that’s flesh…Those are scales. Some reptile. A harnessed monster.” Then the ship was backing, clouded air still hissing, obscuring the dorsal, giving out a not-unpleasant stink.

There was a dreadful, heavy stillness in the air, as if an attack might yet still come. All that could be heard was a creaking of timbers, the heavy slap of fabric in the wind, the sound of water lapping against oars. Moonglum thought he could just hear the sound of breathing.

“They believe our side to be the netherworld,” said the first mate, keeping his lips from moving too much. “But I believe that this place is Hell and we have just met one of Hell’s aristocrats.”

Elric and the pirate captain continued to stare at each other in fixed fascination until the two ships were far apart. Then, without comment, Elric returned to his cabin, leaving his companions on the upper deck.

“My lord has more relations here than he previously owned,” observed the princess dryly. “Has he spoken of that captain to you, Master Moonglum?”

Moonglum shook his head slowly.

“Is that why he is here?” she wondered.

“I think not.” Moonglum watched the archers unstringing their bows and replacing them, together with long quivers of arrows, in their oiled wooden cases.

Then, unbuckling his swords, he followed his friend below.

Ancestral Memories

Moonglum had not expected to find such subtle beauty in the port of Hizss. Until now, the ports on this side of the world had been somewhat gloomy, massive fortifications as if they had once fought long battles. But not Hizss. Her pastel terraces formed slender ziggurats over which poured all manner of flowers. On her terraces lounged brightly dressed, brown-skinned citizens, lazing in the warm, easy air, cupping their hands to call down into her streets to vendors and messengers or merchants on their way to inspect the broad-beamed galleon's cargo and greet her traders. Artefacts which were common on his side of the world, the captain had warned them, might be highly valuable to people on this side, and so, should he be offered something for, say, his belt buckle, he should be prepared to spend some time bartering. The tavern girl, Cita Tine, had brought a whole sack of goods she planned to trade. To his chagrin, Moonglum understood that it was not wholly out of blind passion that she had decided to accompany him to the World Below (or, as the locals preferred, Above). Indeed, almost as soon as they had berthed, Cita had raced down the gangplank to the quay, telling him she would see him back at the ship around suppertime. The last he glimpsed of her was, sack over her shoulder, her pushing through a crowd of men and women and entering a narrow side street between two warehouses. Clearly, she knew exactly where she wanted to go. Moonglum rather resented the fact that she had not thought to include him in her confidence. Once again, they were running out of money. Elric disdained such considerations, but they needed treasure, not close encounters with pirates. Moonglum watched the group of merchants as they made for a couple of dockside inns, saw the priestesses met by two of their own in a canvas-covered carriage, and the saturnine trader sign for a rickshaw to take him up the hill into the city's centre. Then Moonglum glanced at Elric and followed his friend's gaze down to the quay.

Separated from the others, hanging back somewhat in the shadows, stood a tall woman. She was dressed in several shades of green silk, a wide-brimmed green hat hiding the upper part of her face. A small slave boy held a long-handled parasol to protect her from the noonday heat and she rested one slender hand on his shoulder. That hand attracted the Eastlander's attention most. There was a familiar pallor to it. He knew at once that, like his friend, the woman was an albino; and, when she turned to avoid a lumbering merchant anxious to reach the ship ahead of his fellows, the Eastlander's observation was confirmed. Her face was as white as

Elric's, her eyes protected by a mask of fine gauze through which, no doubt, she could see, but through which the sun's rays could not entirely penetrate. She had the same languid insouciance in her manner. She could be the albino's sister. Was this Elric's motive for being here? Was Moonglum the only one risking the voyage from simple curiosity? He sighed and began to wonder about the quality of the local wine.

But when Elric, guiding his princess towards the gangplank, indicated that he would be glad of Moonglum's presence, the little Elwherite hitched his two swords about his waist and went with them, glad, after a moment, to feel solid land beneath his feet, even if he had some slight difficulty in standing upright.

"Another of your Melnibonéan relatives," murmured Nauha, as they approached the green-clad woman. "Is she blind?"

"I don't think so. And she is not Melnibonéan."

The princess frowned, looking up into his face in the hope of learning something more from his expression. "Then—what—?"

Elric might have shrugged, even smiled, as he said: "She's Phoorn."

"Phoorn?"

"At any rate more Phoorn than I am."

"But what is Phoorn?"

For the first time since she had known him, the albino seemed ill at ease. "Oh, we are closely related. But I'm not sure. I don't…" Now he recalled that this was not the kind of thing his people discussed too frequently, and probably never with humans.

"You don't remember…" She was sceptical.

"I remember her. She might not know me."

He had told her enough about the nature of his dreamquests for her to understand at least the gist of what he said. He might have met this particular woman before or after that moment. She might not even be the same woman Elric remembered. Dreamquests usually took place in his plane's past or in utterly alien periods of time; but in the other worlds, where his quests had taken him as a youth, lying on the dream-couches of Melniboné, time became more flexible, more chaotic even. Drawing closer, however, it was obvious that this woman knew Elric. She looked up expectantly as he approached. And began to smile.

"Lady—Fernrath?" To Nauha's surprise, his voice was again a little hesitant. But the woman smiled and held her hand to be touched in that odd way Melnibonéans used for greeting. "Prince Elric," she said. Her voice was unlike Elric's, somewhat sibilant and strangely accented, as if she used an unfamiliar language.

Pushing back his long white hair, he offered her a short bow. "At

your service, my lady." He introduced the others. Princess Nauha was a little overenthusiastic in her response while Moonglum's bow was swaggering and deep.

"You knew we were coming?" asked the albino, while her slave struck at the oncoming crowd with his rolled parasol. She led the little party to where a carriage, drawn by two lively but unhappy striped horses, waited for her at the top of the quay.

She answered: "How could I have known? I always meet such ships."

He helped first Fernrath, then Nauha into the carriage. Moonglum, comparing his traveller's cloak to the fine linen and silk, chose to join the driver on his seat. This clearly gave the driver no particular pleasure.

"You used your magic, perhaps?" he answered Lady Fernrath, challenging her apparent innocence.

She smiled back, but was silent on the subject. "Such a crowd today. Ships from your world are so rare." She lifted an elegant cane and tapped the driver on the shoulder.

The narrow streets, crowded with merchants' stalls, led away into less busy thoroughfares, becoming roads, which eventually passed between slender pines and cypresses, giving glimpses of the port below and the glittering sea beyond.

"Your city is lovely," said Princess Nauha, by way of small talk.

"Oh, it is not *mine*!" Lady Fernrath laughed. "In fact I have very little communication with it at all. But I suppose it is prettier than most hereabouts."

Thereafter they travelled mostly in silence, the visitors occasionally remarking on aspects of the city or the bay, which Lady Fernrath, as if remembering her manners, acknowledged gracefully enough. At last, they followed a white wall to tall twin pillars. Between the pillars were great bronze gates inscribed in a language they could not read but which resembled Melnibonéan. At a cry from the driver, the gates opened and they entered a long drive, which took them to the steps of a low, rather simple house, built in marble and glittering quartz.

While a servant indicated the house's appointments, Lady Fernrath led them through high, cool rooms, sparsely decorated and furnished, to the far side of the house and a well-landscaped garden surrounded on three sides by a tall wall, offering a view directly ahead. The garden smelled sweetly of flowers and gorgeous shrubs. Summer insects flew from one to another. On the lawn, a low table and couches had been arranged, ready for a meal. The view was superb, looking out for miles over rolling, wooded hills, all the way to the indigo sea.

The architecture and design of the place was thoroughly unlike anything Moonglum remembered from Elric's Imrryr, the Dreaming City. The capital of Melniboné had been designed, through her ten thousand years of evolution, to impress with her aesthetic magnificence, her overwhelming power. In contrast, this house and its garden were meant to soothe and welcome and afford privacy.

Almost immediately, Lady Fernrath's servants, all of ordinary human appearance, emerged, taking their outer garments, showing them to guest rooms, helping them to bathe and put on slightly scented fresh, cool robes. Each guest was assigned at least one servant. Only Moonglum was not used to this and took considerable pleasure in the luxury.

Nauha remarked that the fountains and the walls felt to her, though she could not be sure why, like the work of a desert people. "You must think me naïve!"

Lady Fernrath bowed her head, denying this. "I believe they were from some desert place, yes." She spoke vaguely.

It was not long, as they took wine prior to dinner, before Moonglum raised the question of the pirates and in particular their king. He laughed. "He did not make his business clear, though at first we thought he might attack and prepared for the worst."

"You were wise to do so, Master Moonglum. Your instincts did not betray you. Oh, it's clear enough, I would guess, what Addric Heed does for a living." She laughed, perhaps bitterly. "He is a pirate and a slaver. A tradesman! A creature born to the highest blood of all —of *all*—reducing himself to such filthy work!" Her mood changed as she glared into the middle distance. Dark green-gold stars flickered in the depths of her pale eyes. "A thief; corrupt as any human you'll find here. A betrayer and destroyer of his own kin! A *slaver*! A *tradesman*!" She spoke as a woman obsessed. "And his crew is worse. Why even that remaining ship of his is an act of cruel betrayal…"

She lifted her long head like an angry beast. Her robes seemed independently agitated. She broke off, remembering her manners. "He is—he has—" She drew a long, slow breath. "It's said he has pacts with the Lords of the Balance. Yet why they would trust him or use him I have no idea!" Her voice took on a light, dismissive tone. She clapped her hands and ordered another decanter of wine. "Here's one from our own vineyards I hope you'll find palatable."

Moonglum would have asked more about Addric Heed if he could, but no further opportunity came. Then a little later, their hostess saw him yawn discretely behind his hand. "You'll be my guests here, I hope, while you stay in Hizss? I should have mentioned it sooner how welcome you are at my house."

"You are kind, madam." Before either of the others could answer,

Elric accepted for them all.

"I have my lady friend," Moonglum murmured, a little embarrassed.

"Then, of course, she must be sent for, too. It is so rare for me to receive guests at the best of times. And such rare guests! From so far away. From the exotic World Below!" She gave the servants appropriate orders. They should go with the driver to the ship and bring all their things, as well as Moonglum's lady, back with them.

But when the servants returned with their luggage and Elric's light armour, it was to report that the wench had indeed been waiting on the ship for Moonglum, but she had chosen to remain on board ship. She sent a message to Moonglum, saying that she was happier there and likely to remain so.

On hearing this, Moonglum flushed and turned away for a moment. Then, bowing to Lady Fernrath, he said that while he appreciated her invitation he felt he should return to the ship and see to the well-being of his friend.

"I understand," said Lady Fernrath. "I do hope she finds our air more agreeable in the morning."

The sun was setting now and Moonglum thought he saw a hint of pale scales under her neck, but it was surely no more than a trick of the light. Somewhat subdued and doing all he could to hide his emotion, the Eastlander climbed into the carriage and left again for the ship he'd hoped not to see for another few days at least. That his wench should take to pouting now was not to be tolerated. He decided to give her a piece of his mind. And he could not be wholly certain she wouldn't try to steal something of local value from his luggage. He was in such poor temper that he almost forgot the swords he had left in his chamber above.

With Moonglum's absence, the Princess of Uyt felt a little removed from the company, though Lady Fernrath did all that should be expected to put her at her ease.

"And how fares my brother Sadric?" asked their hostess when they were settled on the couches again. "Has his temper or his attitude towards you improved, my lord?"

Elric shook his head briefly. "The Emperor died still voicing disappointment at my failings of moral courage." His voice held a trace of irony, but was without emotion. "The succession lay between myself and my cousin, you'll recall. How we behaved upon our respective dreamquests would determine who ascended the throne of the Dragon Empire. I believe I was chosen not from any sense of fitness but because I made fewer mistakes—in Sadric's eyes, at least!" Another faint, sardonic smile.

As the sun came closer to the horizon, the woman removed the

gauze visor to reveal eyes of pale green-gold, but, when her milk-white hair fell from below her scarf, it was clear she was also an albino. She noticed Nauha's look of surprise and laughed. Nauha blurted: "Forgive me, my lady, I had not realised you were related. You are the Emperor Sadric's sister?"

"My sister married him," she answered softly, while Elric frowned at his lover's rather sudden interruption.

Lady Fernrath waved away any imagined rudeness but leaned towards the albino. "So, Elric, is Yyrkoon emperor now?"

"I killed him. My father named me his successor but Yyrkoon was uneasy with the decision. And he disapproved of my betrothal."

"Your betrothed was not high-born?"

"She was his sister. I killed her also."

"You loved her?"

"After a fashion." His expression became unreadable. "I am surprised you had not heard. Most of my world knows the story so well…"

"I had not understood you to be such close relatives." There was some relief in Nauha's voice.

"Aye," said Lady Fernrath, sipping with relish a glass of grey-green wine. "None closer. Blood relatives."

On hearing this, a mysterious expression passed across Princess Nauha's face but was quickly controlled. Elric, noticing this, seemed for a moment amused.

Then suddenly the princess felt as if a gate had shut against her. She followed them up onto the terrace to dine as the moon came out. The marble and alabaster took on a greenish tinge, touched with gold, and even Lady Fernrath's features offered a faint reflection of colour, but not, Princess Nauha noticed, Elric's.

As soon as Nauha was able, she blamed the change of environment for her tiredness. Then she, too, graciously begged their pardon, saying she was poor company and could see they had much to talk about on family matters. She did not add how the fact that they had increasingly dropped into High Melnibonéan speech as the evening grew older had decidedly helped give that impression.

All went according to the best protocol, but afterwards, in her room, the Uyt princess allowed herself one small growl of rage until her maid had gone and, weeping, she took hopelessly to her bed and lay upon it, staring at the oddly ornamented ceiling, trying to control her wounded feelings. She knew he would not even consider explaining himself when he joined her. She would be lucky, she thought, if she ever saw him again. This took her mind from her own anger and made her recall that she also feared for him.

Princess Nauha had studied the occult under Uyt's wisest scholars

and knew a witch when she smelt one. She was very glad she had brought her swords with her and that they were with her armour in her luggage. She might at least save her own life, she thought, but she was not sure she would be needed to save the albino's. Did the fool understand he was in danger? Or—realisation came suddenly—was she the only visitor in danger here?

Was it coincidence that Elric had brought her with him to Hizss? He had told her nothing of this relative—if relative was all she was—had told her of no plans to visit. Clearly, he had known she would be here. He had hinted at something only a short time before they reached the port. Had he some disgusting plan for the three of them? Or did the sorceress mean to bewitch them both? Or had Elric been bewitched since the moment he had decided to take ship for the edge of the world?

Nauha carefully inspected the room and the garden beyond for ways out of the grounds. Then she took out her armour and laid it upon the floor. Then she polished her sword and dagger, ensuring they would slip easily from their scabbards.

Then she lay down again. She controlled her breathing, forcing herself to think as coolly as she could. A little more relaxed, she next began to wonder if the wine had not been over-strong. There was nothing sinister about the night, after all. Indeed it was beautiful, as were the city and the house. Yet why had all the ports they had seen, she wondered, been so heavily fortified? But not this one?

She drew a long, deep breath. It was stupid to brood on all this, particularly now her swords were stowed close to hand. She was perfectly well prepared to take on any danger that might present itself. She was certain that clean steel could cope with any ordinary foreign witchery.

The Phoorn's Bargain

"I heard you had found the White Sword," Elric said to Lady Fernrath as soon as they were alone together.

She laughed easily, with genuine humour. "And that's why you are here?"

He saw no purpose in lying. "You have it? Oh, I see from your eyes that you do. Or know where it is, at least." He spoke with quiet humour. But he could feel intimations of what he feared, his energy slipping slowly away and little to replenish it, save Stormbringer.

This time she made no reply. She lay back on her couch and stared up at the stars. Then, after a while, she said: "You have heard of the Eyes of Hemric, otherwise known as the Eyes of the Skaradin?"

"An even vaguer legend than that of the White Sword. Hemric? Skaradin? Some serpent from your world's hinterland?"

"I know where they can be found. I do not need to search for them, young prince. They are, however, the blade's price." She turned in the moonlight and looked at him, suddenly hungry for something. Her eyes had taken on a deeper, harder green, even her voice had changed timbre, was oddly accented. "Red pearls. But you need not win them for me, my lord. They are, however, the price of the blade." She moved restlessly on her couch. "Blood pearls, they call them… There are two. I desire them…I desire…Do you remember when we first met, Prince Elric?"

"I remember my dreamquest. I was scarcely more than a boy. My father sent me to seek you and bring back my mother's jade dagger."

"Oh, Elric, you were a comely lad when I saw you surrounded by three of those golden warriors from another plane entirely, who used to inhabit these parts. We drew so much more energy from those alien places. So much *material*…You had no famous sword at that time. I gave you the jade dagger…"

"You did not ask me then to pay you for it."

She smiled reminiscently. "Oh, you paid me. Did your father ever tell you why he wanted it?"

"Never. I think he sought it simply because it had belonged to my mother. But you saved my life."

"You were ever to my taste." Her mouth seemed to have widened now, revealing rather too many teeth. They were sharper, too, while her tongue—that tongue…

He roused himself. "So you will sell me the White Sword for those red pearls? Nothing else? You know what that sword means to me. It could free me from my dependency…"

"Just so. Nothing else. I possess the Sword of Law. And I know

where to find the pearls."

"Lady Fernrath, I did not travel this far to bargain. What do you take me for? Like you, I despise merchants. Besides, I know nothing of this world. How could I begin to look for what you want?" Was there, he wondered, some way he could get to Stormbringer? He had come here following a legend, a memory, something he had heard of long before the Black Sword was his. He remembered one of his first dreamquests and the woman he had met here on the other side of the world, whom he remembered as a friend. Since then, Lady Fernrath had changed or, perhaps he had been naïve, too inexperienced to see her for what she was. Now his desire to be independent of Stormbringer could be further destroying his judgement. With that blade he had killed the only other creature he had ever truly loved. A wave of profound regret swept over him. He sighed, turning away from Fernrath. "My lady…"

She rose from the couch and, as she did so, she seemed to grow larger, her gown taking on greater substance. A heat—or it might have been an intense cold—came out of her, strong enough to burn him if he touched her. He remembered those nights. Those terrifying, fascinating nights, when she had introduced him to all the secrets of his ancestors—the real reason, he guessed, why his father had sent him upon his dreamquest. Or so she had told him. Now she said otherwise. He frowned. Why did she lie to him now? Or had she lied to him then? "Madam. I must go. I can't do what you desire of me."

That great, reptilian face glared down at him. "You are my sister's son. Your blood demands you help me! You come here seeking the White Sword when you already possess the Black. And you did not know there would be a price? Have you forgotten all loyalty to your own, Prince Elric?"

"I did not know what you would demand." He sounded feeble to his own ears.

She drew a strong breath and seemed to grow again.

Elric moved nervously on his couch, wishing he had his sword with him now. He was becoming alarmed. Somehow he needed to renew his energy. He had so few resources left. Lady Fernrath's skin was no longer white but had taken on a gold-green sheen, while her hair moved under its own volition. He feared her in a way he had not when he first came to Hizss, existing in two worlds at the same time, visiting as a courtesy, he thought, the sister of his mother, whom Sadric had loved to distraction. Elric had learned more than he had wished to know. Of his ancestry. Of the people called the Phoorn, who even now lived on in Melniboné, who had not been scattered as the others had been scattered, or killed as his cousins and his other relatives had almost all been killed, after he had brought the sea

reavers to destroy Imrryr.

Then he had loved the Phoorn as he loved them still. They had made alliances when they first discovered this world, coming as exiles to found a civilisation which would be based on notions of justice until then unknown to most gods or mortals. They had, by some vast supernatural alchemy, interbred, though their offspring usually took one form or the other, not both. It was not always possible to predict what would emerge from a Phoorn egg or, indeed, a human womb. Yet, Lady Fernrath had told him of the shape-changers, those few who could be what they willed themselves to be and who had, for centuries, continued their race. He owed much to her. He was wrong to begin fearing her now.

"My lady, I would help you if I could, not because you would strike a bargain with me, but for the sake of our old alliances. I came here, after all, to ask a favour. And I would gladly do you a favour in return."

Her great Phoorn eyes softened. Her speech changed. She sounded affectionate again. "I should not have tried to bargain with you, Elric. But life here has changed a great deal since we last met. Though you never met them, I had a brother, a father, other kin. Over many centuries our world has grown corrupt. Wars were fought. You saw those fortified ports. Monstrous treacheries were conceived. Such appalling treachery…" Her tone became sad, reminiscent. "I need your help, Elric. There is something I have to do. One task before I die. A duty…" Perhaps she cast an enchantment on him, but he found himself sympathizing with her.

Yet he was still wary, still unsure. "No need to bargain with me, my lady. We have an ancient blood pact. I would help you without reward if I could. But could you not have found a warrior here to help you?"

"No. For none possesses what you own."

"You mean Stormbringer? I will fetch it from the ship. And my armour. I will tell Princess Nauha where I am going—"

"My servant has already brought both sword and armour. No need to disturb the Princess of Uyt."

A darkness was filling the sky as deep clouds sailed in from the south. The night grew colder and the albino shivered, fearing further for Nauha's safety.

"Nobody here will harm her," said the Phoorn. "But now I must venture into—take more substance—from—the—netherworld…" A noise like a whirlpool, running fast in high seas.

He had difficulty seeing her now. His mind was less clear than before. The table seemed to have disappeared. The house was a black shadow, unlit.

The sounds of the night had faded when her voice came again. He turned, peering into a void. Above him were two green-gold staring stars: passionless, cold. Her voice was still recognisable, yet hissed like waves on shingle:

"Are you ready to go with me, Elric?"

"You have my word."

Something fell at his feet then. He knew what it was and bent to pick it up. He buckled on his breastplate and greaves, settled his helmet on his head, attached the scabbard to his belt. When he straightened, scaled flesh, long and sinuous, stretched down out of the sky and he looked deeper into those green-gold eyes, knowing them for what and whose they were. At the base of her long, reptilian neck was a natural indentation in which a man might sit. It had not been long since, in the great Dragon Caves of his people, he had taken a carved Vilmirian saddle and placed it in just such an indentation. The Lady Fernrath, a shape-changer of a very specific kind, touched him affectionately with her long claw. While Elric had experienced her strange powers before, reliving the first coming together of their related races, he had never seen her change so rapidly. Nor, in all his adventures and his dreams, had he seen movement so rapid in any shape-changer from mammal to reptile, though the Phoorn were not true reptiles, any more than Melnibonéans were true humans. Both had come into being in other worlds under different gods and philosophies. Both had learned the virtues of the other. And then, at last, they had mated, though still in many ways alien one to the other. And these were the folk whom the Dragon Kings of Melniboné claimed as their ancestors. This was not the first time he had seen why in his world dragons were called "brother" or "sister" and treated with such complete respect, each conversing with the other, when they lived on altered time, so that it seemed to Melnibonéans that their dragons slept for years or decades.

There were no further traces of the human about the Lady Fernrath. She was completely Phoorn, speaking in the ancient language used between Phoorn and Melnibonéan. Completely Phoorn as she bent that beautiful serrated neck to let him mount, turning her head so that residues of fiery venom from her mouth-sacs fell bursting upon the tiled terrace and did not harm him.

As if suspicious of pursuit, the lady firedrake peered this way and that into the night, her great claws clattering on the terra cotta, her wings stretching, wide, wide as she prepared to lift into the darkness of the night, giving voice with wild, beautiful music to the Phoorn's ancient Song of Flight. Springing off the terrace, she began to gallop across the lawn, her sharp senses noting the obstacles as she approached that obsidian sea.

And then she was aloft.

And Elric, seated astride her gigantic, exquisite body, found himself flinging back his head, letting the cool air stream through his long white hair as he lifted his own voice to join in harmony with that complex melody, as natural to him and his kind as when the Phoorn and his own people first came to this sweet, glorious world and determined to take stewardship of it in the name of their ideals.

What had gone wrong between the time when he had enjoyed a long idyll with her and fallen in love in a new way? Then their faith in the Great Balance translated into so many practical notions of order and justice. Now? Now he had become used to lies, secrecies, political and other bargains. The whole world was a darker, more threatening place. If he had known how the changes in the World Below were mirrored in the World Above, he would not have had his friends come with him.

But all such thoughts were dissipating, for he rode a dragon again, bonding, as his genes remembered, with that monstrous, thumping heart, the deep, slow pulse, the beating of vast wings and the sweeping from side to side of that long, muscular tail. He relished the comfort of his heavy black armour but missed his great dragon spear, through which his thoughts were transmitted back and forth.

Now all he could tell was that he was heading west and inland. As dawn sunlight streaked the blue-black horizon, they flew over a forest, spired by great pines, towards a turreted fortress of gold-veined white marble, woven in a way to show both artistic elegance and sturdy practicality—and also, somehow, a faint sense of menace.

Fernrath dived into the depth of the forest, wings close together, claws extended, and neck hunched. She landed perfectly in a glade through which light had yet to penetrate. She allowed him to descend, then spoke to him in Phoorn. “Now we must roost until this afternoon when they begin their tournament. The targets have yet to be chosen and assembled in the castle grounds, within the central bailiwick.” And, cocooning him in her folded wings, she perched on a massive lower branch of one of the tallest trees, and went to sleep.

A Question of Ancestry

That evening, when the sun was still high enough in the sky to burn a bright orange, and she told him of her plans, Prince Elric and Lady Fernrath made their way along a hard-beaten red earthen road towards the unsuspected magnificence of the White Fort, which rose like a fantastic cloud of clear-edged smoke from the sharp green of the almost impenetrable forest.

Reaching the six-foot-thick ironbound timber of the white-painted gates, she called out with such authority that the gates swung open at once, the huge iron bars rising on balancing machinery. They were recognised by their race and this gave them unquestioned admission.

The fort was formed as a series of large towers, one inside the other, to be defended to the death. Each tower had land, which could, if necessary, grow its own food. Elric realised it existed on the same principles as Imrryr, built to impress and to be impregnable at the same time. His people had used an island and an ocean for this. Addric Heed used a trackless forest.

She led him through one walled area after another, through towers and halls and finally up a flight of steps to a short gallery and out into the upper tiers of an amphitheatre, the stone seats arranged to look down onto a long oval green where targets had been arranged for an archery contest. Elric recognised this as something his own ancestors used to play. At Fernrath's signal, he sat down with her well above the occupied tiers. She began to tell him again what she planned and what he must do. From the archery green, drifting in on the light, late-morning air, came the distant screams of the targets, the heavy *thunk* of arrows into bodies, and the applause as an archer made a good score in one of the marked parts of the slave's upper body.

Sitting in a tall, carved chair was the slender pirate slaver Addric Heed, clad in light-yellow robes, an orange scarf swathing his head and shoulders. Surrounded by his captains, of his own kind as well as human, and by others, lightly armed or bearing no weapons at all, he was unmistakeably Elric's and Fernrath's kin. Elric recognized one of the men as the saturnine trader on the ship. Fernrath nodded when he murmured this information to her. "He raids up and down this coast, as he has done for two centuries. The slaves will be sold in Hizss, which depends upon the trade for her subsistence. Those traders inspect the stock here and know roughly what they'll bid when they return to Hizss. They keep their own bands of soldiers in Hizss. You know the place of which I told you?"

"Aye. On the far side and in the furthest tower."

“He’ll expect no attack if I work my Phoorn sorcery, but you must hurry, Nephew, for it will be hard for me to keep so many engaged.”

Then, as a lull came in the tournament, Lady Fernrath rose in her seat and called: “How goes the game, Brother?”

And saw Addric Heed’s head come up in astonishment as he stopped halfway through a joke with his human visitors. He controlled his features, though a question still hovered in his eyes. “Sister! You should have warned me. I’ll have rooms prepared! Your entourage is below?”

“Beyond the gates,” she said. “I did not know if I’d be welcome.” She swayed a little, the outline of her human shape flickering like a mirage, just enough for the onlookers to narrow their eyes, wondering at their own untrustworthy perceptions. A light mist seemed to escape from her mouth and nostrils.

Addric Heed frowned. “Are you well, Sister?”

“Oh, well enough, Brother. Well enough.” A strange scent drifted upon the air. “Prince Elric and myself have been travelling through a night and a day to find you. He is here to recruit your help, as I understand it. I agreed to bring him to you.”

Addric Heed relaxed a little now he had an explanation he could believe. She made a movement with her hands. Her watchers found it hard to take their attention off her. “Can you help me, Brother? Can you help me, Brother? Can you help our cousin?”

“Gladly, dear Sister.” His words were quite as formal and without warmth, but there was no animosity in them. Elric guessed that both had grown used to keeping secrets, even from themselves. Evidently, Addric Heed had no notion of how disgusting his sister found his trade and why, for other reasons, she should hate him when she and her adopted city did so well from the wealth he brought in. Equally, who knew the resentments and greed her brother fostered in his own soul?

Elric hung back as if in discretion or embarrassment, for Addric Heed had forgotten his manners, his whole attention upon his sister. Elric nodded to his nearest kinfolk and typically ignored the humans, even the one he knew from the ship. He went to loll in a seat some distance away, as if to enjoy on his own the meeting of brother and sister. None offered him any attention.

All eyes but Elric’s were now on the were-dragon as she continued to mesmerise them, her body swaying almost imperceptibly. After some minutes, he rose and slipped away. None noticed when he was no longer in his seat. He crossed an expanse of marble and, lifting a metal bar, stepped swiftly into the doorway she had told him to find.

Within the tower room, the only light came from what stood on a small table. This rosy radiance drew Elric to it immediately. He blinked, holding his hand before his eyes.

At first it seemed the room and its treasure were unguarded. No need for guards when the whole fort was occupied by one's own men, thought the albino, stepping towards a beautifully carved pedestal. He responded audibly to their beauty. They were just as she had described them on the road to the fort. This was Addric Heed's most valuable treasure indeed. With these in his possession, he controlled his ship, and with his unique ship, he dominated the seaways. Elric had seen many extraordinary gems in his life and his dreamquests, yet still he was astonished. The bloody light pulsed from two perfect crimson-coloured pearls of magnificent size, depth, and luster, each as large as his fist. Was Addric Heed so certain of his power that he could leave such remarkable gems where anyone might come upon them? The albino reached towards them. He had understood that more than men protected the red pearls.

As he moved to pluck them from the pedestal, there came a movement from the corner of the room. A sound. Something chuckled. Then a voice dry as summer corn spoke. "Good afternoon, stranger. You are an optimist, I see. For all your appearance, no doubt you are another would-be thief who supposes my master grows careless as he watches the competition. Well, Lord Addric Heed might not give his treasure the attention it deserves, but I value it if anything too much." The unseen guardian uttered a small, squeaking sound, like a mouse. "Oh, I do. I do. But then it's easier for me, eh?" Squeak, squeak. "For you see I have only one task to perform, after all. And I take much pleasure in performing that task." Squeak. "While Addric Heed has many things on his mind. Do you fear me yet, mortal?"

At this question, Elric laughed, knowing a sudden exhilaration as his hand flew to his left hip. He seized the hilt of his sword and began slowly to slide it from its scabbard.

A responding chuckle from the darkness, almost good-humoured and lazy. "My dear mortal, you had best hear who I am before you waste your time drawing a weapon. You still have time to open that door and leave. Who knows? Perhaps Lord Addric Heed will not notice your visit and you can escape with your life. See? I give you time to turn and just possibly reach the door before I catch you." Another squeak was followed by a series of little wet ticking noises, as if from tiny rodent lips.

Elric sighed. He continued to unscabbard his great black battle blade, standing his ground, peering into the roseate darkness in the hope of seeing his antagonist. "You are a very assured guard," he said.

"I would perhaps be more modest had I not caught and punished every thief who ever sought to steal those beautiful pearls. They are living things, you know, the Eyes of Hemric. I have guarded them for the past hundred and fifty years, ever since my master, Lord Addric

Heed, brought me up from Hell for the purpose and placed them in my safekeeping."

Then something large began to rise from the flagstone floor to hover over the crimson pearls. The gems glittered and winked in their own light and Elric had the uncanny sense that they watched him. In that, at least, they certainly resembled eyes. The albino permitted himself a shudder as he continued to draw his sword. What was it that guarded the Eyes of Hemric so confidently?

Then Stormbringer was free at last of the scabbard and writhing like a living thing in its master's two hands and howling with a profound and horrible hunger. And then Elric let his laughter roar from his throat as all the old lust for death filled him.

Overhead, two black wings spread with a brittle, whispering sound and fluttered up towards the tower room's roof. Squeak. A kind of invitation.

"Coward," said Elric. "Do you know who I am now? Do you fear for your life? For your soul, if you have one? Come down and engage me if you dare, for it would give me pleasure. I look forward to the novelty. I have never fought one of your race before."

From above, there came a further series of squeaks and smackings. "No mortal has ever fought an Asquinux and succeeded in defeating one." The flying thing opened huge blue eyes, glaring into Elric's face. "You are dead," it said. "I have your life now, for I know your secret. You have failed to restore Law to your dissipating world."

"No doubt you are confusing me with another, Sir Monster, for when I die it will not be in the cause of Law, but in my own cause, or that of Chaos." With casual familiarity, Elric swung the howling blade this way and that. Its black radiance met the red and flowed into it, throbbing. "But all that will depend on my luck and the Duke of Hell I serve. For my patron is Arioch of Chaos, one of Entropy's great generals."

"That hero died in another world. He has no power here." There was puzzlement in the half-seen creature's blue eyes. It's black, flat muzzle twitched. Then it opened a scarlet mouth, glittering with luminous teeth, each sharp as a dagger. Languidly, it licked its oddly shaped lips with a long blue tongue.

"I know not by what crude sorcery your master brought you out of the Far Hell and kept you here, but I warn you, petty demon, to avoid me if you can. I am Elric and the sword I hold was forged in the flames of the burning damned to serve Chaos as I serve Duke Arioch. This blade is called Stormbringer and is quite as hungry as you are. I am very hungry, too."

The demon squeaked again. Each time the sound grew less audible yet somehow more ominous. It flapped up towards the roof

again and hung there for a moment, its dark blue frowning eyes regarding Elric's own glittering red orbs. It shifted its gaze from Elric's eyes to the pearls it guarded and it made a small, puzzled sound. Again it opened its mouth and licked its teeth with its blue tongue, one by one, as if counting them. Then, with a high, whistling sound, its long white fangs clashing, its eyes glaring, the thing dropped upon him. Elric whirled, trying to engage the Asquinux face-to-face, but it would not let him. Its slender claws dug through his armoured back, making it impossible for him to stab with any precision.

Eyes blazing with battle hunger, Elric lifted his head and howled.

"Arioch! Arioch! Aid me!"

Roaring the name of his patron, Elric swung the blade back over his left shoulder and there was a crack as it connected with the demon's bones.

The Asquinux shouted suddenly, shockingly, red mouth widening, the noise filling the tower. One claw came free. A swinging cut over his head and Elric's blade bit into the monster's knotted flesh. There came a terrible shrieking sound as the demon dragged those claws from the metal protecting Elric's shoulder. It flapped back into the shadows. Its white mouth was panting now and it turned its head, lapping its own foaming wounds, its blood dripping like rain.

"You are more powerful than I, it is true," said the demon in a quiet, deadly voice. "But I must try to kill you or break my compact with Addric Heed, in which case I should perish all the more painfully. Soon his army will come and you will perish on the points of a thousand swords."

With evident reluctance, the demon flapped down, attempting again to get purchase with its claws in Elric's body. This time, however, Elric understood its intent and ducked, throwing up Stormbringer so that the demon fell back, yelling curses in its own tongue. Then Elric leapt forwards, stabbing, and the thing flapped further up the tower, trying to work its way around so that it could make another attack on the albino's back, clearly its only manoeuvre. So Elric deliberately turned his back until he heard the demon begin to drop down, then whirled, swinging the great blade with all its wild momentum and striking the demon in its hip, which cracked and made the Asquinux scream and keep screaming. A flood of ichor gushed from its wound as it wheeled, its wings smacking at the crimson air.

Again Elric ducked and threw himself to one side, dodging the attack. The thing's fluids splashed on the floor, narrowly missing the albino. He leapt this time, stabbing. The blade slipped through flesh and met bone. Now a foul stench began to fill the tower room, and black blood boiled as the demon gave its sudden attention to the two

great pearls, its claws reaching for them desperately.

"You'll not save them from me, little monster!"

Elric swung Stormbringer again. The sword wailed with pleasure as its hunger began to be satiated. Elric felt the dark, supernatural energy flowing into him. He shuddered, for the stuff made every nerve tense, every muscle threaten to cramp. Savagely, he swung at one of the grasping claws and sliced it off.

The claw began to inch by its own volition towards the pulsing red pearls. The demon shouted and its teeth clashed in fury. Elric grinned and swept the claw into a corner. Then he stabbed once more.

The Asquinux whimpered, understanding its defeat as Stormbringer purred to itself, like a satisfied cat, feasting. The albino drew a deep, shuddering breath. Now the wounded Asquinux flapped about in the air just above the pearls, still struggling to fulfill the duty of its compact, knowing that the penalty of failure was worse than death. Something like a plea for mercy filled those huge blue eyes. But Elric was never merciful. The notion was alien to him and his kind.

Elric chopped off the demon's other grasping claw. Raging, it span in the air overhead, its teeth clashing, the ichor spraying. "You are a poor wretch of a guardian," he said, "but you are doubtless all that Addric Heed could afford."

And when the creature turned its blue, despairing eyes upon him, the long teeth shuddering and clashing in its mouth, the red tongue flicking up and down, it said: "My weird said I could never be slain by a living mortal. But I did not know I could be killed by a dead man, nor by one as powerful as the thing dwelling in your blade." The last of its energy throbbed out of it, pulsing through the sword, which took its due and passed the rest of the foul stuff on to its wielder. "Which is the master? You or the blade?"

The wounds from the demon's claws had burned into him and though he now had extra energy, he was losing blood. He stumbled to the table and picked up first one heavy pearl and then another, slipping them into his shirt beneath his breastplate and tightening the laces with one hand.

It was as well that Stormbringer remained unsheathed. Next moment, the door had burst open and there stood the saturnine man from the ship with about a dozen of his fellow slave-traders. All of them were fully armed with a miscellaneous collection of weapons. They had not expected to find Elric standing, let alone observe him delivering a death blow to the still-writhing body of the guardian Asquinux.

If the doorway had not been so narrow, they would have backed off, but that was not easily done. Warily, they edged towards the albino, beginning to form a half-circle, closing in on him. He smiled at

them as if in welcome, holding Stormbringer almost lazily. He was breathing heavily from his exertions but otherwise the creature's own tainted energy still sustained him. He was vaguely aware of the blood running down inside his armour from his wounded back.

"I am glad to see you gentlemen." The albino offered them a brief bow. "I cannot tell you how famished I have been."

With rather less confidence than they had shown on first entering, their boots slipping in the demon's dark, stinking blood, they began to close in.

Elric was laughing easily now, enjoying their dismay. He mocked them, feinting with his growling, insatiable blade. The men's eyes narrowed as they pressed in. Then the albino reached out, almost elegantly, and took the head off the nearest soldier. They backed away, pushing one another aside in their panic. All they wanted to do now was escape, but Elric moved quickly so that he was between them and the dying demon. He reached behind him and drew the door as shut as possible. The severed head had rolled into the aperture and stopped the door from closing completely. From outside, a single bar of light entered the tower room. He feinted again, moving like a herdsman gathering his flock. Then, when the men were grouped together in the light, he swung the great, moaning broadsword so that its blade sliced into one, cutting him so deeply in the torso that half his body fell backwards while the other half fell forwards.

Elric yelled with battle joy as the slaver's energy filled him. He struck again and two arms flopped in the mess made by the demon's dying. He stabbed, drawing that man's life-force deep into himself, and then, when only the saturnine slave-trader was left, he took his sword and slipped it delicately into the man's chest so that instantly the pumping heart sent energy into the sword and from Stormbringer into Elric's own glowing body. His white skin blazed like silver and his red eyes glared in triumph. He lifted his head, surrounded by its halo of milk-white hair, and laughed—a sound which filled the tower with anguished triumph and which keened and echoed through all the countless worlds of the multiverse.

When Elric had drawn a quick breath, he stepped through the door and saw the amphitheatre filled with startled faces. Addric Heed and his slavers stared up at him in baffled astonishment and Lady Fernrath ran like the wind towards him, shouting, "The slave quarters! Follow me!"

"The slave quarters? Would you free the slaves?"

"That, too, if we can. It might buy us time."

Then, while Addric Heed and his baffled warriors began to absorb what had happened, the two albinos dashed down the outer steps of the tower. Panting, she led Elric into the bowels of the White Fort. She

had armed herself with a massive, beautifully balanced battle-axe, which she handled with considerable expertise. Together they cut down any who sought to stop them while Stormbringer sang its bloodthirsty song.

Then, at last, they stood in long corridors stinking of human waste and putrifying flesh. There, shackled in every available space, were the choice men, women, and children whom Addric Heed had taken from all the cities and ships of the coast to be sold at the slave markets of Hizss in the coming days. These were the healthiest. The rest had failed to survive. Some corpses still hung in their shackles beside the living. Some slaves raised their heads, hopelessly curious. They were reconciled to their future.

Lady Fernrath did not listen to their questions or answer their hope. She was headed for a large marble enclosure at the far end of the corridor, whose bars were set further apart and were four times the thickness of any others. She dropped the axe, her eyes fixed on that great cage. But, while she ran on, Elric spared time to strike through chains wherever he could and release as many slaves as possible, especially the men. He anticipated rapid pursuit from Addric Heed and his slavers and wanted as many people fighting for their own interests as possible.

By the time he reached her, she had drawn back heavy bolts from the gigantic cage. Within, its empty sockets staring into space, its wings crumpled and awkwardly set, its claws clipped and bound with brass, sat a frail old Phoorn seemingly on the point of death.

Lady Fernrath approached the creature and placed gentle hands upon it, stroking its grey-white leathery scales and crooning to it in the ancient language of her people.

“Father, it is I, your daughter Fernrath. Here to free you.”

“Oh, child, you know I cannot be free. I cannot see to be gone from here. I cannot fly. Your brother will always keep me prisoner. There is no hope, daughter. You should not have risked Addric discovering the truth, of knowing what only we two know.”

“It is different now, Father.”

From the far end of the slave quarters, there came shouts and the noise of fighting. Clearly, now they were free, the slaves were not readily going to lose their liberty again. They understood that this was their last chance. This knowledge gave them the power to fight, even though few of them were professional soldiers. Clashing metal told Elric that some had already seized weapons. But he knew only a miracle would allow them to prevail for long against Addric Heed’s trained warriors.

With a deep, not-unhappy sigh, Elric prepared to do battle with an army.

The Advantages of Supernatural Compacts

The old Phoorn was called Hemric and he was, of course, Lady Fernrath's father. "He has been here for over two centuries," she told the albino, "dying to serve my brother's despicable descent into trade."

"Your brother is a poor specimen of our race," said Elric in distaste. "And he has held his own father with human slaves?" Elric frowned. "Bad form at best, madam. If one would blind and imprison a relative, it should be with its own kind."

She was too hurried to answer. "Quickly, the pearls. Give me the pearls!"

He slipped them from his shirt, already half-guessing what she meant to do. Stroking her father's long snout, she persuaded the old Phoorn to lower his head, then, taking the glowing crimson pearls from Elric's hands, she placed them one by one carefully and delicately into the long-healed sockets where his eyes had been, all the time crooning a long, melodic spell. Elric watched, fascinated, as the flesh began to form around the orbs and suddenly the Phoorn blinked. He blinked again. He could see.

And then, as there came a shout from up ahead and the battling slaves, protecting their children, began to fall back before Addric Heed's well-armed warriors, the twin crimson pearls glowed and pulsed. Intelligence came into them and with intelligence came anger. The old Phoorn's venom had long since dried up, but the long, beautiful snout twitched and snorted as fury filled him.

A deep, distant boom rose from somewhere within the old Phoorn's huge chest. He lifted his head, and the quills—each the height of a tall man—rattled on his chest, while all along his tessellated tail the huge combs rose and stood proud. Even Elric found the transformation astonishing. The booming grew deeper and louder. He raised himself up on his muscular legs and blinked. From each eye now fell a drop of blood. The face, which regarded first his daughter and then Elric, was benign and profoundly sad, full of bitter wisdom. "With vision comes power," he said in Phoorn. And blinked again. This time it was a gigantic salt tear which fell.

Elric realised that the slaves had fallen back, were running past him, seeking the freedom of the forest. Addric Heed was there, riding astride a massive battle horse, blond and armoured. Behind him were massed more cavalry and fresh infantry. The slaves had, for the most part, dropped their weapons, taken up their children, and ran out into

the light, only to stagger back in, pierced by the arrows of Addric Heed's waiting archers. "Like all others, save Hizss, this place was designed for warfare," she said, "no matter what the occasion." She watched as her father flexed wings long unused.

From directly above, came a thunderous excitement of yelling, terrified voices, a clashing of metal.

"Some fresh sorcery of Addric Heed's no doubt," she said. "It was through his magic that he first learned to make slaves of his ancestors and use them to build his power."

"Aye," agreed Hemric, seeking her out with his unfamiliar sight and looking down on her with a benign expression never seen any longer on the faces of his Melnibonéan kin. "We were unsuspecting. When he could not make us fly for him, he took out our eyes and made us swim. I would like to kill my son if I could."

"You shall, Father, when we find him," she promised. But it was a promise she would not keep.

Another roll of thunder. Did it come from the sky? Addric Heed lifted his handsome, arrogant head, surprised by it. He reined in his pale stallion, looking upwards, staring about him. Having no other plan, the slaves had returned to mass around Elric. They had reached a sudden impasse. Even with the black sword, the albino knew they could not defeat such numbers.

Elric considered a parlay with Addric Heed, but the power in him, which filled his mind, his body, and his soul, was not a compromising power; it did not apologise for itself, for it had no conscience. His unnatural empathy for humans had drawn him to the Young Kingdoms and beyond, to learn of their morality and humility, their curiosity, all that his people had lost, for he had realised instinctively that only with these qualities restored could his own folk survive.

Then Elric's cruel Melnibonéan pride had brought him home and achieved all he had desired to avert. He had assured the destruction of his people, the burning of their towers, and the end of a power they had taken for granted. The only power he had now was from Melniboné his family's sorcery and its history, the pacts which it had, in its moments of crisis, been forced to make with Chaos, where once, long, long ago, it had leaned towards Law. His dreamquests into other planes, including his own family's past and present, had taught him all this; but he had learned only to a degree how to harness and control such power, to restore his vitality with the life-stuff of living, sentient things.

Addric's army advanced through the echoing galleries towards Elric, that panting, unthinking creature bearing a pulsing, moaning sword in which red runes writhed, who was the last emperor of a dying race, a ragged horde of slaves at his back, together with an

albino woman and her enfeebled father. At the pirate chief's command, the archers began assembling before him. But then the thunder came again. This time Elric saw a messenger riding through the ranks to address Addric Heed. Fernrath's brother lifted his hand to halt his men, turning in his saddle to speak, but not all had heard and some continued to advance. Elric watched as the pirate slaver led his men back through the prison quarters and up into the main fortress. The stairways were wide enough to allow the cavalry to remain mounted through several of the upper galleries.

Soon the advancing soldiers began to realise they had been deserted. Some turned to follow. Others called out, warning that the fewer their numbers the worse their plight.

Wearily, the slaves bent again to pick up abandoned weapons.

This was an opportunity Elric had not anticipated and, trained strategist that he was, he at once shouted to the rabble army to follow, leading a charge that almost immediately broke Addric Heed's forces, sending them running behind their master, convinced they were already defeated.

The warriors were brave and experienced, but they were completely demoralised from the moment Elric struck them—a ghost from their own pasts—a whirlwind of black, vampiric death, its howling rune-blade an image of their own legends, its blazing crimson eyes haunting all their nightmares. And with their leader gone, and in the certain presence of their own Prince of Chaos, the demon lord Arioch, who was one of their shared pantheon, they had no stomach for fighting their kind. It took the Lady Fernrath to speak to Elric in the High Tongue of the Phoorn, reminding him of who and where he was, to urge him to lower his sword and look wonderingly around him at the piled corpses, the bodies of all those who had gone to feed himself and Stormbringer. So many damned souls! And then the albino knew a kind of grief. But it was not for the dead slavers that he wept.

While Elric wept, there came another wave of amber-armoured soldiers. At first it seemed they had rallied, but they were in obvious disarray. Many had lost their weapons and, seeing that their comrades were captured, threw themselves on the mercy of their former booty, who promptly stripped them of their arms and put them in chains. For the moment, the air was free of arrows. Clearly, the archers had been called to another part of the fort to reinforce Addric Heed's army. But who could be attacking?

Suddenly Elric looked up to hear the constant rolling thunder moving first towards them, then away again, while the alabaster walls shook and shivered, and small showers of stone and plaster fell from

ceilings and walls.

Leaving the others behind to guard the ancient Phoorn and to organise themselves and their prisoners, Elric and Lady Fernrath stalked warily to the nearest stair and began to climb. As they reached galleries with windows which looked out on other windowed galleries, they could see that all the way to the top of the great fort, a terrible fight had been taking place and dead soldiers in amber armour lay everywhere. The sound of thunder was beginning to subside. The sky was clearing and the sun turned clouds to pale gold. From above, Elric heard his name being called.

"Elric! My lord! We thought you dead!"

The albino stopped and looked up. At length, he saw through a smashed window in the gallery above a broad, redheaded face grinning down. The face was Moonglum's.

Slowly, the madness deserted Elric and in something close to joy he ran through the galleries until he found his friend. Princess Nauha stood with Moonglum and also Cita Tine, the tavern wench. All were armed with bloody swords and bore the familiar look of war-wolves who had fought a long, exhilarating fight. And then, as if Insensate Fate could not contain this level of coincidence but must burst and spread it across the multiverse, there appeared the nuns of Xiombarg, smug as nuns are who have pleased themselves by some deed of virtue, to report that all was settled as justice demanded.

"Our lady answered us and we reached an agreement," declared one as she straightened her unwieldy crown.

"Agreement?" Elric knew that the Gods of the Balance rarely made bargains not to their advantage.

Then Cita Tine was calling out. "Where? The slaves? Are they still in the pens?"

Elric shrugged. "Some are. Others set off through the forest." He was puzzled by her interest.

She sheathed her blades and peered down. Then she moved away in the direction from which Elric and the Lady Fernrath had come.

Elric turned enquiring eyes on his friend. Moonglum sighed and scratched his head. "That's why she came with us. Her plan all along was to sell valuables here and use the money to buy her husband back from the traders. He was taken a voyage ago."

Elric frowned. "So—?"

"Aye. She used me and now she's off to see if her spouse survived." Moonglum sighed. "Still, for a few weeks, I have to say, she was happy to have me as his substitute." He cast a hopeful eye upon one of the acolytes, who moved closer to her colleague. And he sighed again.

"So Xiombarg's the cause of all this destruction?" Elric wiped

other men's life-stuff from his face.

"We fought hard and well, but we could not have succeeded without her ghastly help." Nauha stepped closer, "We certainly enjoyed a little sword work of our own." She noticed that blood was crusting on both her blades and, glancing around her, saw a useful cloak. Bending, she ripped the garment away from its former owner and began to wipe first one sword and then the other.

"Addric Heed?" asked Fernrath, looking about her at the devastation. "Does he live?"

"After a fashion," said the Princess of Uyt. "Knowing your relationship, I begged him spared. But I was almost too late. Xiombarg —"

"Where is he?"

Nauha frowned, thinking. "Two floors below and…" She shook her head. "Two to the left. His banners and his horse are there. He barely lives, however. Xiombarg was eating him."

Lady Fernrath was already running from the hall seeking the downward staircase and calling her father's and her brother's names.

"There has been a feasting here today." From curiosity, Elric followed her, the others coming in his wake. "Was this Xiombarg's only payment?" He indicated the mounded dead.

Nauha laughed. "I think not. I recruited the priestesses when it became clear the supernatural was involved. Moonglum and the girl came up from the town, ready to defend you, but Fernrath had already—already transformed herself. And carried you off."

"You knew where we went?" He moved down a staircase covered in corpses. "How so?"

"We were in time to see you leave. Cita Tine knew of the White Fort and how to get there."

"But you arrived so swiftly!"

"Xiombarg was enlisted for that, too. The priestesses summoned their goddess and she transported us here."

"Yet no sacrifice was made?"

"Oh, she feasted very well. And there was some trinket at Fernrath's house, which Xiombarg valued. All she did, she did for that."

They came upon Fernrath then, amongst all the blood and dismembered bodies, amber-coloured armour discarded like the remains of shrimp sucked clean of their shells. She crouched on the marble floor, her shoulders shaking in grief. In her arms, she held something ragged and red. Elric saw that it was all that was left of a man. Addric Heed, proud pirate prince and dealer in slaves lay there, taking great gasps, his lifeblood bubbling from his chest. Little was left of his face. His legs and an arm were missing. One side of him looked

as if it had been gnawed upon. Xiombarg had been interrupted in her feasting. He tried to speak, but failed.

Suddenly a bulky form appeared in the nearest window. It clung uncertainly to the sill, then flapped awkwardly into the gallery, its huge wings slapping and snapping in the sunlight, its bulk vast and white as it turned, its massive tail swinging, its long, pale neck stretched out and topped by a massive reptilian head from which blazed two eyes as brilliant and crimson as Elric's own. The so-called red pearls, now animated with a new life-force, gazed up into the pale gold clouds passing high above. The Eyes of Hemric had returned to the possession of he from whom Addric Heed had stolen them.

The old Phoorn's red eyes blazed for a moment and his long, wizened snout grunted as he made his way forwards on stiff legs. At last, he stood over the body of the son who had enslaved him and suddenly all the anger left him. His great, pale wings folded themselves around his son's remains and he lifted the dying thing in his foreclaws, a strange, soft keening coming from somewhere deep in his chest.

"I cannot," murmured Hemric. "I cannot." Then he moved towards the window, still carrying what was left of Addric Heed. With considerable difficulty, he hopped again onto the sill and then he had flapped into the air, the long keening note rising as he flew low over the far forest, making a peace with himself and his kin which the onlookers honoured but could scarcely understand.

When Elric next looked at Fernrath, he saw that she wept silently, her eyes following her father, her head on one side, the better to hear that melancholy music. Then she turned, straightening herself. She saw Elric but walked away from him, to stare through one of the tall, broken windows at her disappearing father and what was left of her wretched brother.

When, after some moments, she looked back to glare at the albino, her eyes blazed green and the tongue, which flickered across her teeth, was not human. "He has paid a fair price for what he did. His blood and the blood of his followers shall feed the forest and soon nothing will be seen of the White Fort. It is all he deserves. But now I am the last of my kind, at least on this side of the world." She let out a deep, hissing breath.

"Anywhere," said Elric. "There are none of us who are fully Phoorn and non-Phoorn at once. None who bridge the history of both races. None, save your father."

She sighed. All the anger was gone from her. "And now we are both avenged."

Hemric, most ancient of the Phoorn race; father to both Lady Fernrath and the renegade Addric Heed, who had blinded him and

forced him under water to drive the last of the slaver's ships, flew against the golden horizon, his voice still keening, deep-throated and full of the joy of flight, the anguish of death.

"Addric Heed was ever jealous of his father," murmured Lady Fernrath. "For years he and his fellow Dukes of the Blood plotted to enslave the true Phoorn who were not Halflings like me. And when the time came, and their eyes were stolen, I lacked the courage or the character to resist. I saw the great runes cast and the great sorcery made and then the Phoorn were robbed of their eyes and forced into servitude. First they were harnessed to the ships and made to fly just above the water, guided by sharp goads. As they grew old and too feeble for that task, Addric Heed determined how he might have ships built around them, using their wings to drive those vessels at enormous speeds, terrifying and mystifying all they claimed as prey. I could do nothing but help my brother. He swore that if I did not, then he would torture my father to death. Thus I acted between him and the slave merchants of Hizss."

"That is why Hizss is the only unfortified city along this coast," murmured Elric in clear understanding. "Hizss did not defend herself because Addric Heed never attacked there. Indeed, he preferred only to prey on ships and left the well-armed cities alone as his dragon allies died, one by one. But his own father!" He spoke almost in admiration. "This is treachery even I could not match…"

Her smile was tragic, her voice sardonic. "Few could," she said.

Elric watched the albino dragon as he returned, no longer bearing his son's remains. He saw Hemric twisting and turning high above them, then diving to sail across the tops of the trees, and for a moment he envied the creature, his own ancestor, who had existed for as long as the bright empire of Melniboné, who had seen its birth and lived to learn of its end.

He looked around. The two priestesses stood a few steps back behind Elric and the others. They watched the old Phoorn's flight in disbelieving wonder.

"We have to thank you, ladies, for your intervention," said Elric. "But might I ask what price your patron asked for her help?"

The acolytes of Xiombarg exchanged glances. "It was something not strictly our right to offer her," said one.

"But the needs of the moment seemed to dictate our agreement with her bargain." Nauha stepped forward, the better to watch the wheeling dragon. "She knew it was in your house, Lady Fernrath. I knew it was your property…"

"It was all she would accept in exchange." The other priestess seemed a little embarrassed. "That said, the Balance has been restored and Chaos brought to her rightful place in this plane's grand

cosmology! That was the will of Xiombarg. For as you serve Duke Arioch, my lord Elric, so we serve his cousin, his rival and his ally."

"Ah," said Lady Fernrath in quick understanding. "But it was already promised, I think. By me."

"We had no choice."

"It was, I take it, a white sword." Suddenly weary, Fernrath glanced round her at all the destruction.

"Aye." Moonglum was surprised she had guessed so easily. "There was nothing else Xiombarg would accept and time was pressing."

They all seemed stunned by the next sound.

Even when Stormbringer was drawn and he was engaged upon his joyful work of destruction, Elric had never been heard to laugh in that particular way before.